

Separate the leadership of different universities

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The firing of Richard Lariviere from his job as the president of the University of Oregon will be discussed for a long time.

As we engage in debates, there is one fundamental issue that we Oregonians have to resolve well before hiring a successor: Should UO, and perhaps Portland State and Oregon State too, be spun off the Oregon University System (OUS) with a separate governance system?

From the day I was hired to teach at Western Oregon University back in 2002, I have wondered at the logic (or lack thereof) in having an OUS that governs both UO and WOU. After all, WOU is what one would refer to as a "teaching university" while UO is a "research university" and the missions of these two institutions are very different.

It is not that UO faculty do not engage in teaching — they do. But, at research universities, the expectation is that faculty will devote significant effort into systematically creating new ways in which we understand the world.

The metaphorical earth-shattering scholarship in the sciences and the arts happen at research universities, and that is the yardstick with which we would then measure the "worth" of a research university like UO. Thus, it is no surprise that faculty who gain membership into prestigious bodies like the National Academy of Sciences are from research universities, and not from teaching universities.

In the American higher education system, the typical expectation is that teaching universities like WOU have a markedly different role. Pretty much all of our work is about teaching at the undergraduate level. Nobel Prize winners are, therefore, not to be found in teaching universities, even when they are phenomenal teachers, as many of them are.

When there is such a wide gulf between what is expected at UO versus WOU, I am always surprised that both these institutions are governed by the same board.

When I joined WOU, the OUS had a new chancellor in Richard Jarvis. He was a geographer and taught an introductory physical geography class for us — for free, as I recall. But even before his second-year anniversary on the job, Jarvis was fired rather abruptly because the then-governor, Ted Kulongoski, wanted to set a new direction for higher education.

Unfortunately, all I have witnessed in these 10 years is more hirings and firings and the creation of more and more committees, without any directional clarity whatsoever. This decade-long experience makes me conclude that the current crisis is not anything new that Lariviere created, but is the cumulative effect of dilly-dallying.

I can only hope that the termination of Lariviere's contract will compel the governor and the Legislature to settle the issues once and for all.

In working out a plan, they ought to recognize that WOU and its sister regional universities,

Eastern Oregon and Southern Oregon universities, are alike in their missions, while UO, PSU and OSU have very different institutional missions. Forcing these institutions to coexist within the same OUS structure will merely prolong the agony, and is the worst possible deal for taxpayers and students.

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